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The Office of Information and the Family Farm

Service to America's farm families is basically the aim of the Department's information work and of that of the cooperating Land Grant Colleges.

This aim stems from the very beginning of the Department in 1862 when the Act establishing it stated that the Department was created "to acquire and diffuse among the people of the United States useful information on subjects connected with Agriculture..."

Information is Basic to Farm Family Development

Information arising out of agricultural research widely disseminated and demonstrated has made possible a vast improvement in the living standards of farm families. It has helped family farming stand free and strong enough to support the ideals of a democratic people.

The dynamic quality of agricultural research and service programs requires active measures to keep up the flow of agricultural information as it develops. Thus the farm family of the United States can maintain and immeasurably strengthen its position as a cornerstone of American life and a symbol of hope to farmers all over the world.

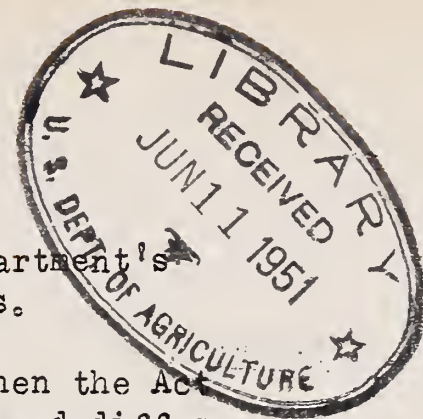
National Policy in Information

The active role of agricultural information is consistent with freedom of the press, radio, and other information media, which is woven into the very framework of our national life. Our constitutional government, functioning through the three Federal Branches and State Governments, has jealously guarded that freedom. The three branches of Government in enacting laws, in executing and interpreting them, have zealously preserved that freedom in keeping the doors open to workers in press and the other information media.

To further governmental policy in this direction, limiting Federal legislation has been enacted on four principal points: (1) restriction on publication, (2) control by the legislative branch of the Federal printing establishment, (3) a requirement that all Federal information materials can be distributed only as a result of a request for such material, and (4) a rather studied policy of imposing on the Federal Budget structure a sense of hesitancy in appropriating funds for information work.

From time to time the policy of limitation has been implemented by investigation reports, declarations in appropriation bill hearings and reports, and requests for reports on volume of information work in executive agencies. This policy too frequently seems to presume that information can be separated from administration in government. For example, the laws to promote soil conservation whether by technical or incentive methods cannot be executed simply by enactment. Such laws must be implemented year-by-year by authorization of Congress -- and the administrator -- for use not only of technicians and materials but of adequate promotional, including informational, resources as well.

Likewise, Extension agents, "to aid in diffusing" useful and practical information, must have some informational tools made available through annual appropriation to accomplish its job; so must agricultural credit agencies to make credit sources known to farmers; and foresters to manage and protect the national forests.



Structure and Methods of Operation

Structure

The Office of Information was established under its present name in 1925 as a consolidation of functions, some of which were formally organized as early as 1889, to coordinate in the Department the dissemination of information useful to agriculture as authorized by the Act establishing the Department of Agriculture in 1862.

The Office functions through eight organizational divisions: Director's Office, Divisions of Publications and Special Reports, the Exhibits, Radio, Press and Motion Picture Services, and a Business Office. The Office is prohibited in the annual appropriation act from establishing or maintaining field offices.

Each Department agency and bureau, except the Library and other departmental staff offices, has an information division modeled on the above organizational pattern but in less detail and size. Information units operate in the regional offices of the Forest Service and Soil Conservation Service, and in area offices of the Production and Marketing Administration. The cooperating State Extension Services function as state information offices, in cooperation with the editorial offices of the State Experiment Stations. Some Farm Credit districts have information units. All county offices of Department agencies and the cooperating Extension services have some information functions and important public contact responsibilities, most of which touch closely the interests of farm families.

All these information divisions and subdivisions supply facts to the established commercial media of communicating intelligence; the facts to be further communicated to farmers and the public, as media representatives choose. Department research and service information is either funneled through the Office of Information in Washington to national media channels such as the press associations, radio networks, farm organizations, and printed publications; or funneled back to State Extension Services to undergo local adaptation for media use, use by the farm press and local radio stations; or transmitted to the Extension services and directly to local media channels by agency field offices (with or without information units), and State Extension offices; or channeled through cooperative and credit associations directly to farmer clients.

Methods of Operation

Since the Department was committed from the first to disseminate information, methods of preparing it for ultimate use are geared to the processes of press, radio, and other media of communication. This spreading of information means that an item of Department activity is seldom given out as an isolated bit of information on a one shot or single media basis. For example, one research finding may well be prepared in these forms for immediate and long range use:

<u>Form</u>	<u>Distribution</u>
Technical Bulletin	Research workers, libraries, GPO-sale.
Leaflet	Libraries, request distribution, Extension services, correspondence, Congressional use.
Press Release	Press associations, trade or science press, items in farm editor's letter.
Agency Periodical	Item for specialists to explain in correspondence or farmer contact.
Clip sheet item	Weekly clip sheet for science press.
Radio Release	Inclusion on broadcast, in script for Land Grant college or field application, background item to farm radio directors.
Women's News Release	In Food and Home Notes to women news editors and women radio directors.
Technical Magazine	As article by author at subscriber's expense.
Science talks	By specialist or in speech of research administrator.
Popular Magazine	Item of research feature in national magazine.
Extension Specialist demonstration item	Included in talk at meeting or individual conversation in office or on farm.
Motion Picture Scene (or Film Strip)	As whole or part subject for a motion picture for demonstration or educational use.
Exhibit Showing	Small part in a large fair exhibit, or small group exhibit.
Still Picture	In press, magazine, textbook, or display use.
Inquiry reply	Verbal answer to a question through knowledge or reference to the written material or by use of the leaflet for quick reply.

The fanning out of agricultural information could be described at great length. The oldest form, by publications such as annual and special reports, the Agriculture Yearbook and Farmer's Bulletins, has been the basic means of bringing information developed by the Department and Land Grant colleges to farm families. These and other publications in newer forms have long served as tools to extension workers serving farm families directly, and as subjects for reporting by the press and radio media. The visual forms of pictures, motion pictures and exhibits are later media involving special problems. They are mostly pointed toward the dissemination of information to groups or large gatherings of farm families.

Radio and Television

Radio is a prime example of direct information to farm families. By radio, the Department and extension workers enter the farm home and visit with the farm family directly. Some farmers have radio sets in the barn. Others have even installed receivers on their tractors. In general, however, the radio set is a farm family utility. It has shattered for all time the proverbial isolation of the farmstead, and revealed new mutual interests in the farm living room and kitchen.

Radio and the vigorously growing television, not only bring music and entertainment to all members of the family; they keep the youngsters upon their 4-H activities, provide the farmer with the weather forecasts, market reports, and research findings on which his success often depends, and offer tips and demonstrations immediately useful to the farmer's wife and homemaker.

No component of the American population makes more practical use of radio than does the farm family. Every Saturday farm families from coast-to-coast listen to one of the 167 stations of the NBC network broadcasting "The National Farm and Home Hour" and/or one of the 120 stations of the ABC network carrying the "American Farmer" program.

And practically every minute and every hour of every day, somewhere in this country many farm families listen to information which originates in the Department. In nearly every agricultural county of the Nation, county agents use some of this information in their own broadcasts. In practically every State, Extension Editors cooperate by coordinating Department and State information for broadcasters they serve. Over 200 commercial radio stations now maintain one or more specialists who devote part or all their time to broadcasting farm information, much of which they get from their contacts with the Department's Office of Information.

Good programming from a radio audience holding viewpoint demands that these programs contain information for the various members of the farm family. Many of these programs combine home demonstration features with those designed to keep the farmer himself abreast of the activities which affect his profession.

As more windmills and silos sprout television aerials, actual demonstration of farm and home practices are being shown in the family circle, as a regular thing. Already, in the sections where television is available to the farm family, it is fast gaining recognition as an educational medium. The Office of Information, the Department, and the Land Grant Colleges now face the problem of how it can best use this medium for the benefit of the farm family at the minimum cost.

Balance in Media Use for the Public Interest

The information worker, collaborating with the administrator and the specialist, often must choose from the total available material that can be disseminated with available resources. The choice is influenced by many factors; the importance of the information in improving farming, request for the information, the ease of communicating it, seasonal needs, whether for immediate or longer time use, and finally, the cost of preparing it in usable form and of disseminating it.

Audience is also a factor. An item intended to educate extension workers themselves, or a cooperative manager may be adequately covered in an agency periodical with reference to existing materials. On the other extreme, forest fire prevention calls for a full kit of informative materials and a year-round stimulation of attention through all media and channels in city and country.

Cost is too often considered the most important factor in selecting the form in which to prepare information for effective distribution. Here the speed of modern mechanics of communication may deceive us into a cheap, but ineffective form for dissemination. For example, quickly converting information into a press item or into a quickly prepared publication only, may achieve far less results than could be obtained by the higher immediate cost of a television package program or a motion picture to be used over a little longer period, but at a smaller final cost per user. In more visual form, the user may understand and later apply the information more quickly and to better advantage.

Distribution Is on "Request" Basis

Within the limits of national policy and law, the distribution of information is on a request basis. Even the press requests information. Federal information workers also try to point to sources of information, supplying essential facts to guide the writer to get his own story and material at the expense of his private enterprise, rather than at the taxpayer's expense. The bulletins of information issuing from Department sources are on a request basis, and are planned to keep expenditure of appropriated tax money to a minimum. Many bulletins are available in agency field offices, in extension offices and in cooperative and credit offices. Press releases and notices of availability of publications, exhibits, and motion pictures go to the primary sources for conversion into the form used by the communication media to bring the notice to farmers and city workers.

The special legislated distribution of farm bulletins and the Agriculture Yearbook through Members of Congress is itself a form of notification. This distribution is limited by the amount of appropriated funds, by annual bulletin quotas to Members of Congress, and by the Member's limitation to specified number of bulletins per correspondent. Beyond notice distribution, and initial free distribution in numbers estimated as sufficient to reach research workers and farmers, the student and the casual reader must get his copies from the library or purchase them from the Government Printing Office. The only departure from this method is the use of cheap publication reprints to answer information requests, in place of the more costly practice of writing letters.

The whole question of distribution of effective information is bound up with the question of cost, particularly first cost. The information job is the Department's, the bureau's, the administrator's. Information workers, editors, broadcasters, employees having direct contact with the farmer and the public are the prime instruments of disseminating the information the Department assembles. The basic responsibility is on the administrator to channel sufficient resources into his agency's information work to balance his information output with the rate at which he develops research findings. The research administrator has the multiple duty of providing information to get the results applied in practical farming and food handling operations, and of telling other researchers of findings for further research development as well as to avoid duplication of research.

Using the Latest Methods

In planning his research or service work, the administrator takes full advantage of the latest instruments and methods. The tremendous mass of information from all sources in written, oral, and visual form which beats on the vision and hearing of the American farmer and citizen places a responsibility on the Department to make equally good use of the modern instruments of communication. Thus, the Department needs to make greater use of visual presentations, and briefer, to-the-point publications. Both types of communication will be effective in agricultural distribution channels, whether in agency, field office, cooperating extension or cooperative channels, through Congressional offices, the press, radio, television, or national magazines.

In the category of visuals are still pictures by themselves, in groupings (such as a "picture story"), and in publications; film strips; motion pictures; picto-graphs; large and small exhibits; and finally, posters of varying size and use. Modernizing publications means chiefly shortening the so-called "popular" publications, and substituting illustrations for text, or using them for specific illustrations to clarify text. Also tying together bulletin illustrations to a film strip, film, or small display used at demonstration meeting, is often not only an effective teaching method, but a means of making a more lasting impression.

Possibilities for Improvement

That agricultural information work is effective, is evident in the widespread application of findings of the Department, the widespread public understanding of Department programs and the constant stream of requests from farm families and others for further information or service from agricultural agencies in the Department and the States. Equally effective work in the future depends partly on greater use of the more modern mechanics of information, -- films, television, and illustrated brief publications. These are all pointed toward the farm family directly, whether transmitted through Extension meetings and demonstrations, field office use, through Congressional offices, or television broadcasting channels.

The insistent demand for dissemination of results under the Research and Marketing Act adds to the drive for more information resources to report the research to research workers in the traditional pattern, but then to go on to educate consumers, and to put new marketing information into the hands of processors and handlers of agricultural products, stopping nowhere short of the final user. The application of the research information developed is definitely beneficial to the stabilization of family farms, even though the effect is indirect and mainly through better income, more food reaching the consumer with less waste and less costly handling.

Another area for improvement lies in the field of planning publications. To the extent Department workers know in advance what publications are planned in the States and vice versa, available funds in both places can be more effectively utilized year by year to meet current needs. A system of exchanging publication plans for a year in advance proved very successful from 1944 to 1947, when it was discontinued through lack of resources in the Department.

A small number of information field offices of the Office of Information would be extremely useful in this area, as well as in other phases of Department operations. There is an increasing trend toward issuance of regional publications by groups of Department offices and experiment stations. These could be coordinated with Department publication practices through a few field information offices. Otherwise such offices would be immensely helpful to Department agencies on regional problems, and they would often provide direct assistance to agencies in spot problems arising out of unusual or seasonal weather or crop conditions, or unusual situations such as the present mobilization effort.

Recommendations

The Department's whole information operation, which the Office of Information spearheads, edits and coordinates, is subject to the general interest of a very large part of the American public who ask for information from the Department, and to the special interests of the daily, farm, and science press, the network and farm radio, national publishers, fair associations, motion picture distributors, the extension services, and the Congress itself. To meet the needs of all these various interests, and in so doing to serve farm families better, basic improvements must be made in the Department itself. The more important areas for improvement are:

1. Revision of outstanding popular publications to shorten and make them more pointed to current agricultural practice. This can be achieved through some expansion in writer staffs in Department agencies to revise publications for popular use.
2. Expansion in use of television as a direct medium, partly through preparation of film for television use.

3. A program for annual production of a planned group of agricultural films mainly on demonstrational subjects, for better information to farm families.
 4. Expand the use of radio tape recordings and establish a tape recording exchange for more effective dissemination of information from the Department and information between States.
 5. Revival of publications planning method to keep Department and State specialists informed of each other's publication plans one to two years in advance. More effective planning in this area would provide more new publications with the same or less resources, and therefore would directly promote economy in use of appropriated funds.
 6. Establishment of a small information field staff of the Office of Information for coordination of Department information work. The field staffs would provide needed technical assistance in publication and printing problems to agency field workers, rather than serve as issuing offices. 1)
 7. Reinstitution of radio training schools for State extension specialists and field employees, and expansion of such training to include television guidance to improve the information output which goes directly through these channels to farm families.
 8. Establishment of a current progress report to digest progressive research developments for the information of research workers, and to promote wider application of research by providing basic references for private writers on research subjects to follow up.
 9. Establishment of a trade press service unit in the Office of Information to funnel out for faster application the marketing research findings under the Research and Marketing Act.
- 1) To effect the recommendation for an information field service, it would be necessary to remove the prohibition on maintenance of field offices by the Office of Information,